

A Nineteenth-Century Record for Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) in South Carolina

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Records for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) in South Carolina are few and fragmentary. James Tanner, in his seminal work on the species, summarized what was known of its distribution and status in the state as of the 1930s (Tanner 1942). At that time the most recent sightings of what was, even then, an almost extinct species came from the lower Santee River Swamp. Post and Gauthreaux (1989) in fact indicated that the last official sight records for the species in South Carolina came from that area on 12 May 1935 and June 1936.

Maxcy Gregg (1815-1862) was an attorney and prominent resident of Columbia, South Carolina. His grandfather, Jonathan Maxcy, was the first President of the University of South Carolina (then South Carolina College). Like many of his social standing, Gregg was an avid shooter and sportsman and considered himself to be an amateur ornithologist and naturalist. Gregg also kept a meticulous journal of his outings, specimens bagged, and even the number of missed shots. This journal has been stored at the South Caroliniana Library and was recently published by Shotwell Publishing LLC and edited by Suzanne P. Johnson (Johnson 2019). The journal covers the period 1842-1858 with most entries taking place around the outskirts of Columbia. However, Gregg and several companions made a boat trip down the Congaree River from Columbia and the entire length of Santee River from 30 December 1843 to 20 January 1844. On 12 January 1844 Gregg shot and killed an Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the lower Santee River floodplain. The following day, 13 January, Gregg and company broke camp and sailed “about 15 miles down the river to Flagger’s Ferry.” Since there was no ferry by this name, it is likely that Gregg got “Flagger’s” confused with Staggers, the name of the ferry where US Highway 52 currently crosses the Santee River Floodplain. This would place the location where he shot the bird near Couturier’s Lake (an old oxbow) on the south side of the river and about ten river miles east of the Lake Marion Dam. This location is consistent with his previous journal entries where he had dropped off some companions on 9 January at the old Santee Canal, 2.8 river miles east of the Lake Marion Dam, and his camp of 10 January at the “upper end of the Rocky Reach,” a well-known exposed limestone rock formation in the river. They spent two nights at their next camp, where he secured the woodpecker, and only “about an hour’s run” downstream from their previous camp of 10 January. Since the Santee River is the boundary between Williamsburg and Berkeley Counties, the county where the specimen was obtained is unclear. The disposition of the specimen is not known. Gregg was apparently not a taxidermist (Johnson 2019: 7) and there is only one known specimen from South Carolina (Post and Gauthreaux 1989).

On this same trip, Gregg noted on 4 January that he “heard” an Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the river swamp but he gave no specific location. According to his journal he would have heard it somewhere between his previous camp near the confluence of the Congaree and Wateree Rivers that form the Santee River and his next camp at Wright’s Bluff, now part of the Santee National Wildlife Refuge in Clarendon County. This implies that Gregg was familiar with Ivory-bills and likely had seen, and heard them, elsewhere.

James Tanner visited the lower Santee River Floodplain to search for Ivory-bills during the late 1930s and pronounced Black Oak Island (where the Lake Marion Dam was constructed in 1941, and now under 35 feet of water) to be “a large and excellent virgin forest of sweet gum and oaks” and the best section for Ivory-bills in the whole Santee bottoms (Tanner 1942). This area is only a few miles west of where Gregg had taken his specimen in 1844. Tanner also looked at other areas of the lower Santee, including the Wee Tee (Wittee) Lake area and Steward’s Neck-Wadmacaun (Wadmacon) Island, all farther downstream from Gregg’s specimen location, and indicated they provided good Ivory-billed habitat as well. Wadmacon Island was the last South Carolina locality where the woodpecker was officially observed in 1935 and 1936 (Post and Gauthreaux 1989).

Gregg’s 1844 record, and possible record of hearing one, provides additional evidence that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were found throughout the Santee River floodplain, possibly as far north as Clarendon County. The Upper Santee River divides into the Congaree and Wateree floodplains, both featuring extensive, contiguous bottomland hardwood forest extending northward for another 50 miles to the Fall Line at Columbia and Camden, respectively. There is no reason to believe that Ivory-bills did not occur here in the nineteenth century, although evidence to support an occurrence remains elusive. Wayne (1910), however, did provide a Fall Line record from near Cheraw, Chesterfield County, for April 1889 of three Ivory-bills seen foraging together on a large, dead oak tree on the banks of the Great Pee Dee River.

Literature Cited

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